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-John

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## The Story

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### *Mistakes*

President Lee Granada was attached to a horizontal metallic bar that hung from one point in the empty cell by two ropes, or cords. His wrists were secured at each end giving the man a crucified stance that made him look like a rag doll hanging out to dry. He still wore his dark blue pinstripe suit, which by this time were looking less then pristine and his national lapel pin.

Beside him hanging in the same fashion was his chief of staff, Harvey Mellgers. Harvey was unconscious still and so was not squirming in his bonds as the president was. The president saw that Harvey's head had been partial shaved and wires had been attached to his scalp in some manner he couldn't make out. The sight was wretched.

He struggled to see anything in the square room that might give him some clue as to where he was. There was nothing. The room was metal, square, and devoid of any objects at all. The president and his best friend, Harvey, were completely alone.

What had happened? He couldn't remember much before receiving the phone call that the order had been given. The general had assured him the whole affair was over and would never be spoken of. The president had hung up the phone, stood to look out the window and finished his glass of sherry. It had been his fifth glass in an hour.

He vaguely wondered if he'd passed out from the alcohol but doubted it. How had he gotten here?

President Granada was a man in his early sixties and in very good shape. Normally he projected a type of movie star persona that had secured him his election and he had been sure it would win him re-election. The win had been secure up until the thing crashed in the woods north of Portland, Oregon.

Granada was the first Hispanic-American president and the only president to sit in the oval office that wasn't pure white. His race was a source of tremendous pride and had allowed him to do things for the people of his country no president had been able to. He had spent his three and three-quarter years in the Whitehouse championing the under privileged, fighting for the rights of the common man, and standing for real justice. Some said he was the first president to *actually* do those things.

He had spent his life free of the scandals and intrigues that his fellow politicians found themselves in. His devotion to honor and his family and ensured it making it a very simple thing. He often laughed as those around him stumbled into the tabloids and courts for reasons that to him seemed ludicrous and completely avoidable had they simply been good men.

The president truly felt that his presence in office was essential to the continuing progress of the nation. He'd seen too many statistics change for the better to believe that if he wasn't re-elected all his hard work would stand on its own. The country needed *him*.

When the object crashed...how many hours had it been? Granada had no way of knowing how long he'd been there or how long he'd been unconscious. When the object crashed thirty hours before the last point in time the president could remember he saw the first legitimate threat to his presidency rear its head.

Harvey moaned beside him and wriggled, "Wha? Where are we? Lee?"

Harvey was about the president's age but much more worn from a lifetime of backroom negotiating and worrying. Harvey Mellgers was one of the men behind the scenes and liked it that way but it took its toll.

The president tried to smile craning his head toward Harvey, "It'll be ok. I don't know what's happened but we can't be missing for long before someone finds us. Don't forget my implant."

It was true. The last three presidents had been injected with micro-transmitters in case of this very event. Granada had resisted the idea but then given in when the secret service had run him through some scenarios the chip could help them avoid...scenarios like this one.

Harvey tried to chuckle but it came out like a sick gurgle, "You sure bitched about that one, Lee. It...it should come in handy now."

The president nodded, "Do you remember anything?"

Harvey shook his head, "Last thing I remember was getting in bed after getting the general's call."

"Yeah, that's the last thing I remember to. I mean the phone call anyway."

The president paused, "You think this is related?"

Harvey coughed and struggled to make his bindings less tight, "To what?"

The president looked at him.

"The landing? No one knew about it, Lee."

Granada nodded, "Did we do the right thing?"

"Lee, that news chopper got footage. We couldn't let it go and we destroyed the evidence in the process."

The room was suddenly filled with an ear-piercing howl. Unable to plug their ears they simply writhed in their bindings as the sound filled them with agony. When it ceased

the two men had to shake their heads and then consider whether it had really stopped.

The ringing in their ears was no less loud.

A door opposite them in the wall neither had seen opened admitting into the room and acrid smoke that began to burn their lungs as it crept around their feet. The air in the room seemed to be filling with it and soon except for the fact that they could breathe the president thought the oxygen had left the room.

Harvey had passed out.

The still entering smoke parted slightly as a figure entered the room draped in robes and shadows. None of the person's features were visible but its breathing was loud and the president thought he could smell the person.

It entered completely and the door slid shut, again unable to be seen. It walked, or rather glided, around the room circling the two bound men and then stopped in front of the president who squinted his burning eyes to see under the hood. The shadows it created were impenetrable.

It pointed a shrouded hand at the president's chest and uttered a string of incomprehensible sound. Harvey's body writhed and a pulse of light traveled through each of the wires attached to his scalp. Harvey's mouth moved and in a voice like one would imagine belonging to the dead he spoke for their visitor.

"You are the leader of this world?"

President Lee Granada shook his head, "No."

"You are."

"I'm am the leader of a portion of it."

The person considered for a moment, "Your...portion...crash in it?"

It was strange and bizarre to hear Harvey's voice speaking this tortured English and he tried not to look at his friend. He fixed his gaze on the robed figure.

“What do you want? Who are you?”

Harvey writhed as if he was fighting the influence and failing.

“My son,” the figure wheezed through Harvey, “Where is my son?”

“I don’t know who your son is.”

“Where is my life mate?”

The president tried to look understanding instead of fearful, “You have to tell me who you are so I can help you.”

“Where is...my daughter?”

“I don’t KNOW what you’re talking about.”

The figure became agitated. It seemed to shuffle back and forth and then circled the two men once more. Harvey’s writhing became more intense almost seeming to parallel the agitation of the figure, or person the president now assumed to be their captor.

“Why have you taken us?” the president asked calmly.

Their captor stopped moving and regarded the president, “You know...your life rhythms tell me you know. You heart...beating fast...you eyes....shifting. You suspect.”

“Were you...did you know about the crash?”

The figure nodded, “You know.”

“We didn’t know anything about you.”

“You destroy life. You regard life as little.”

The president shook his head, “No! It was a mistake. I swear. I protect life. I preserve it! My life is protecting life!”

The figure stood unmoving and placed a hand on his shoulder standing close but still not affording the president a view under the hood. Something the captive president was now unconcerned with. His captor’s hand had no weight.

“You say...you do not practice. My mate, daughter, son...dead. Why?”

The president's mind shifted back to the memory of Harvey's phone call to him telling him of the crash and the news helicopter that had snuck footage of the site.

"Lee. Lee if this gets out...this is aliens, Lee. This will shake the beliefs of everyone!"

The president had asked Lee why they had the right to cover it up.

"Lee! If this gets out we're done. It's gonna be about military threats. Military spending. Nobody's gonna give a damn about welfare, kids, the sick. They'll strip national health, Lee!"

"But they might be alive."

Harvey had been desperate, "Not for long. Nobody on Earth will know what to do for 'em. It's just galactic bad luck."

The president had hesitated, his path unclear.

"Lee...we have no time...let me handle this. Ok?"

In a heart beat of thought, President Granada had weighed the lives of a country of people just crawling out from decades of oppression against the lives of some unknown creatures and the three people on a news helicopter.

"Do it. Have the general report to me."

Harvey had been concerned, "You sure. I can take care of it."

"I want to know, Harvey."

"Alright."

Thirty hours later after an agonizing day of photo opportunities and lunches and speeches that now seemed hollow, false somehow, the president, alone in his office received a phone call from the general.

The chopper had suffered *accidental* damage due to its unfortunate close proximity to the military containment unit at the crash site and the downed object had been

destroyed by the fireball of the helicopter, which had plummeted to the ground coincidentally on top of the crash site. Several Marines had died in the debacle but the situation was under control and the area had been cleared and cleaned. All wreckage had been disposed of.

The president hung up the phone completely able to read between the carefully scripted lines of the general. He had ordered the deaths of two journalists, their pilot and the planets only known visitors from space. He had tried to explain it all away but he knew he'd be unable to.

Then he'd awoken here in this room with Harvey at his side.

Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he realized fully what he'd done. His actions had been a contradiction. He had contradicted in one conversation with Harvey everything he'd worked for his whole life.

President Granada looked at his robed captor no longer afraid. He was ashamed. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," the president sobbed.

The figure stepped back from him and Harvey rasped the figure's thoughts, "You are without hope. Your race...is dangerous."

"What? No. I am sorry. It was a mistake...it was my fault."

The figure shrugged off its robes and revealed to Granada a shining roughly human shaped ball of yellow energy. It was beautiful, dazzling. It extended a wisp of itself that it emulated arms with and put it again on the president's shoulder.

"No. It is not your fault. It is mine. You are weak."

The president looked at the spectacle of it confused, "No...I killed your family."

The creature floated back from the president, "We were going to warn you. Protect you. No...you are dangerous. We will leave."

"What? Please no...protect us from what?"

“The danger.”

The president’s imagination in full gear was able to extrapolate the creature’s meaning, “No! Take me...punish me. I killed your family. I KILLED YOU FAMILY!”

The creature shook its energy-replicated head sadly, “No.”

The president blinked and was standing in his office. The empty glass in his hand, he looked out the windows toward the Washington Monument confused and wondering if he’d imagined it or if it he was going crazy.

He looked down at himself. His suit was rumpled and soaking wet and his wrists were red where the cords had bound him. He was soar and fatigued. It had indeed been real.

The phone behind him on the desk rang breaking the dense silence in the Oval Office.

“Hello?”

“Lee? Lee...do you...do you...?”

“Harvey. It was real. It was very real.”

There was a sigh on the other end, “What did it do to me?”

The president thought for a moment, “It spoke through you. Do you remember what it said?”

“No. Lee, we can’t mention this to anyone. We can’t.”

“I know. Harvey?”

“What?”

“Shave your head.”

There was a pause, “Oh, yeah. God idea. See you in the morning.”

The president hung up the phone and poured another glass of sherry feeling miserable. He was a fraud.

What danger? What would the creature have saved them from? What was coming? What could have been?

Six months later President Lee Granada sat in his office after a meeting of the joint chiefs, the first of his new term. The re-election had been a breeze.

Granada had slowly but surely moved past the bizarre event. He had resolved to forget the occurrence repent his decision and compensate the families of those involved. The later had been difficult but together he and Harvey had found ways to do it.

The phone on his desk rang and he answered it feeling once again and for the first time since the crash of the alien craft, like the president. He felt like a good man.

“Yes? Fine. Send him in.”

Harvey walked into the office his face looking ashen, “Lee? We alone?”

The president smiled, “Yeah, what’s up?

“Lee. Orbital tracking detected something. Lee, it’s huge.”

“A meteor?”

Harvey shook his head, “No, but something big. It’ll be here in hours.”